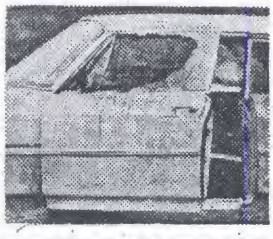

Gary Thomas Rowe Jr. testifying before a Senate committee, left; Mrs. Viola Liuzzo and the car in which she was killed; Rowe photo by James K. W. Atherton — The Washington Post

The Strange Life Of an FBI Informer

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By Warren Brown

BY HIS OWN account, he was "one hell of a man." He could "skin more heads," love more women, outtalk and outsmart most men around him. So, he says, it was only natural that back in the rough-and-tumble 1960s, when Freedom Riders and hooded night-riders were taking to the Alabama highways, when "race-mixing agitators" from the North were doing everything to raise the ire of "good ol' boys" from the South — it was only natural that the FBI would pick him, Gary Thomas Rowe Jr., to infiltrate the "invisible empire" of the Alabama Knights, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Incorporated.

"I was a hell-raiser," says Rowe. "I loved excitement and I always wanted to be in law enforcement . . . Yeah, and I wanted to serve my country. Going undercover gave me a chance to do all of those things."

By other accounts, it gave him a chance to do a lot of other things, too. And that's why Tommy Rowe, at 45, speaks in the past tense when he describes his manhood. That's why he's out of work, worried and bitter. Very bitter.

Lots of folks in Alabama, in law enforcement and on the streets, say Rowe was a crook and a murderer. They say he used his "position" with the FBI to get money and to get away with the violence that excited him so much. Birmingham police say he is a prime suspect in the 1963 bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church there that blew away four black girls. They say he pulled the trigger that fired the shot that killed civil rights worker Viola Gregg Liuzzo on a lonely Alabama highway in 1965.

In Lowndes County, Ala., where Liuzzo was slain, the people are doing more than talking. Two weeks ago a grand jury there voted to indict Rowe for the Liuzzo murder — 13 years and two federal conspiracy convictions after the fact.

If there is a trial — Rowe last week was still awaiting the arrest warrant his lawyer told him to expect — it'll be filled with irony.

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Rowe, the star prosecution witness in the 1965 Liuzzo case, will be the defendant. Eugene Thomas and Collie Leroy Wilkins, two admitted Klansmen who spent six years in federal prison because Rowe testified against them on conspiracy charges stemming from the killing, are, according to Alabama law enforcement sources, expected to bear witness against Rowe this time.

The blacks Rowe says he wanted to help by putting the Klan out of business have already moved against him. Seventeen blacks and one white sat on the grand jury that voted to indict him. Blacks, largely excluded from the 1965 Liuzzo murder panels in the county they once called "Bloody Lowndes," are also expected by some local officials and media representatives to play a major role in any new trial of the case.

Rowe, a big man with a baby-fat face, says he can "hardly believe" what is happening. He alternately lashes out at the Birmingham Police Department, the FBI and "those maniacs," Wilkins and Thomas, for his current predicament.

He says the Birmingham police would like to put an end to his book, "My Undercover Years with the Ku Klux Klan," and to an NBC movie based on it. The book contains numerous allegations, some of which tend to be supported by available FBI documents, that police in Birmingham and nearby Alabama towns worked with the Klan in many of its actions against civil rights workers. NBC officials say the movie, which can be released any time in the next two years, closely follows the book.

"The FBI has used me and discarded me, and they're now afraid to vouch for my credibility," Rowe insists. And Wilkins and Thomas? "Those bastards are just out for revenge. They now have the cover of the law . . . They're all after my ass."

A Product of His Times

ROWE'S IS A complicated story, rooted in the hatreds, fears and violence of the times that gave it birth. It is a tale filled with varying degrees of villainy and lacking in any clear-cut heroes.

Rowe himself is an example.

When he's careful, he'll tell you he never loved blacks. When he's not careful, he'll say he never loved "niggers." In any case, he'll tell you he never hated them, either.

He grew up in Savannah, Ga., on Tattnell Street, once the dividing line between Savannah's black and white neighborhoods. "We used to play with them," Rowe says of the blacks. "Our back yard was the only thing that separated us from them. I once wanted to have one of my . . . black friends over for dinner, but my daddy told me that you just didn't do things like that."

His daddy, Gary Sr., was a "common laborer" who was "kind of looked down upon" by other whites, Rowe remarks. And when his daddy spoke about "the niggers," it "never much bothered me. I just thought that that was the way things was. That was just life."

Rowe left Savannah when he was "around 19." He left with barely two years of high school, went to Tennessee, where he married the first of three wives, and eventually wound up in Birmingham.

He liked guns and policemen, and his affinity for both got him into trouble. In 1952, while working as an ambulance driver in Birmingham, he was arrested for carrying a concealed gun without a license. He was acquitted of the charge the same year. Four years later he was arrested and accused of impersonating a Birmingham police officer; that charge brought a conviction and a $25 fine.

Rowe became a bouncer in a white Birmingham night spot and quickly earned a reputation as a man who could "skin heads," or beat people up. It was while working in that capacity, he says, that he first received "feelers" from the Ku Klux Klan, and later from the FBI. He says the Klan wanted a man who could fight and the FBI wanted a fighter who could spy, and both got what they wanted.

Others tell another story. They say that Rowe's infatuation with police work led him to the FBI and that his fascination with violence and excitement led him to the Klan.

All lies, says Rowe. "If I personally believed what the Klan believes, I never would've worked for the FBI. I didn't join until the FBI asked me to join. The FBI paid my initiation and bought my sheets." His entry into the "invisible empire" was urged and arranged, he says, by Barrett G. Kemp, then in charge of the FBI's Klan investigations in the Birmingham area. A bureau spokesman says all past and present FBI agents who worked with Rowe have been advised to keep mum because of the pending charges in Lowndes County.

Learning Secrets in Bed

BUT FBI documents now on file in the Birmingham Public Library, originally made available through the Freedom of Information Act, seem to support those who say Rowe approached the FBI, and not vice versa.

For example, a memo dated Dec. 5, 1960, sent to the special agent in charge in Birmingham from the "Director, FBI" in Washington, reads: "Based on information set forth in correspondence from your office, you are hereby authorized to take steps to develop Rowe as a potential racial informant, including the direction of his activities.

"This is being done in view of the fact that you have been in contact with Rowe and accepting information volunteered by him since May 1960 . . ," the memo said. It added: "You should make it clear to Rowe that his cooperation with the FBI must be voluntary and confidential, and that he can in no way consider himself an FBI employe. Caution should be exercised at all times during contacts with him to be certain he is not a plant [working for the Klan against the bureau]."

A deal was struck. Rowe was paid $60 a month plus $25 for car expenses, according to FBI records. Judging from the bureau's memos, he quickly became a valuable non-employe.

"Since his short association with the Klan, he has advanced quite rapidly [within the organization]," one memo said. Another made the familiar refrain: "BH 248 PCI RAC [one of the bureau's codes for Rowe] . . . has provided reliable information in the past . . ."

Many of the memos were sent from the Birmingham FBI office to the "Director, FBI." Some did not reflect reality.

For example, one memo, written in June 1961, read: "There has been no indication of any marital difficulties, nor any derogatory information [about Rowe] that could possibly embarrass the bureau." The truth was that Rowe's second marriage was falling apart at the time, fractured by his attempts to work regular jobs while keeping up with the bureau and the Klan. "Of course, my being a womanizer didn't help any, either," Rowe adds.

In fact, he says the bureau encouraged his escapades.

"They told me to sleep with as many Klan wives as possible to find out what their husbands were up to. I did. I was knocking them off like ducks. I got more information from those women than I ever got from the men."

The bureau ostensibly didn't want Rowe involved in violence, and the Birmingham office worked mightily to convince Washington that their man was all right on that score. In November 1960, the Birmingham office wrote: "Informant [Rowe] uses good judgment in his contacts with members and officers of the Klan . . . and is always alert to trouble and possible violence by the organization. His good judgment has been used in the past to avoid being present at possible incidents of violence . . ."

"They Would Have Killed Me"

ROWE SAYS he tried to avoid violence *whenever possible*. But he adds that it wasn't always possible — that he often had to "skin" some black heads and "knock" some integration-minded white ones "in order to maintain credibility" with the Klan. "There was no other way. They would have killed me if I didn't act like them," he remarks of his fellow Klansmen.

So when nine Freedom Riders and many bystanders were brutally beaten by Klansmen in Birmingham on May 14, 1961, Rowe was there. He even got his throat cut in the incident. "People were swinging and hitting all around me," he recalls. "All of a sudden, I seen this great big nigger coming at me with a knife. When I held my hand up to block him, this nigger swiped my throat."

In two separate memos dated May 18, 1961, the Birmingham FBI vaguely referred to and then deleted any reference to the wound Rowe said he "almost died" from. The first memo reads:

"It is recommended that BH 248 PCI RAC be paid $175 for the month of May only . . . [The payment] is in addition to the regular monthly payment to BH 248 PCI RAC. This additional sum includes $15 for services rendered in reference to the racial incident of 5/14/61, and $50 for medical expenses for an injury received by informant at the incident. The information furnished by BH 248 PCI RAC has been most valuable regarding the AK, KKKK, Inc., and the incident."

All references to injuries and medical expenses were deleted from the second "decoded" memo.

But the available FBI documents, which cover Rowe's early years with the Klan, do include many notes about apparent collusion between Klansmen and some police officials in the Birmingham area. Most of those notes were supplied by Rowe, but others were provided by bureau agents themselves.

A memo dated Nov. 5, 1960, reads: "Informant [Rowe] has been alert to advise of the Klan influence on local law enforcement agencies; and through written report on Aug. 9, 1960, he advised that through the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office [which includes Birmingham], he received a pistol permit by showing his membership card from the Klan."

The Birmingham FBI was particularly suspicious of Birmingham Police Sgt. Thomas H. Cook, whom they believed to be acting as a double agent with the Klan on many matters, including the 1961 Freedom Riders beatings. A memo dated May 5, 1961, reads: "The bureau is aware that Sgt. Tom Cook of the Birmingham Police Department has been furnishing information concerning potential violence — given him by the Birmingham FBI office — to the Alabama Knights, Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, Incorporated.

"In view of this situation, information in the enclosed letterhead memorandum will not be furnished to the BPD, in view of the great probability of exposing BH 248 PCI RAC [Rowe] . . ."

Cook, who now works as a private investigator in Birmingham, acknowledges that he worked "undercover" for the FBI "as well as for the Birmingham police." But he contends that he was "never officially connected with the Klan," and he denies working with Klansmen to help set up the Freedom Rider beatings.

"I knew a lot of them because it was part of my job," he says of his relationship with local Klansmen. "I knew Rowe, too. A lot of the stuff in those files is just Rowe talking . . . Rowe would lie about anything in order to make a point with someone in law enforcement. It's just part of his makeup, I suppose," Cook said.

The former policeman concedes that some of "the stuff in those files" is damaging. "But I don't know how you fight something like that. It's like fighting a ghost," he says.

"They Used to Call Me 'Fed' "

THERE ARE many ghosts in the Rowe saga. And for Rowe the most haunting is that of Viola Gregg Liuzzo. He said in his book that her killing — the sheer brutality of it — "turned my life inside out."

To the big question, he says he didn't do it. "I swear on a stack of Bibles, by Jesus Christ, by God, by all that's holy, that I didn't kill that woman," he says. "Collie Leroy Wilkins

"They told me to sleep with as many Klan wives as possible to find out what their husbands were up to . . . I got more information from those women than I ever got from the men."

The FBI's Man in the Klan

killed that woman. He knows it. I know it. And that'll be the truth to the day we die, I swear to Christ."

But it's the "little" questions that torment Rowe. He was sitting in the back of the chase car next to Wilkins, who was on the right rear side, Rowe says. Both he and Wilkins, he says, stuck guns out the car window as they passed Liuzzo's car. But Rowe says he did not fire a shot. Wilkins, a rough, 21-year-old, dedicated Klansman at the time, did all of the shooting, Rowe contends.

If true, why didn't Rowe attempt to knock Wilkins' gun away? Why didn't he say something or do something at the time that would have saved "that woman's" life?

"Everyone always asks that question," says Rowe. "They just don't understand that I was in a life-or-death situation. A lot of people in the Klan always suspected me of working for the FBI. They used to call me 'Fed.' They were always testing me. There were several guns in that car that night. If I had knocked Wilkins' arm away, I would've been killed."

Rowe accused Wilkins of the Liuzzo killing in two state trials. He also testified against Thomas and W. O. Eaton. As a result, the late Matt Murphy, the defense attorney, accused Rowe of violating his "sacred" Klan oath. He used terms like "white nigger" in describing Liuzzo. The victim was riding in the car with a black man — who survived the attack — at the time she was killed. Murphy played on that. He invoked white supremacy.

The state trials, one with an all-white jury and the other with a nearly all-white jury, ended with no convictions.

Rowe, who was not charged in the original case, testified against the three again in a federal conspiracy trial. This time they were convicted of violating Liuzzo's civil rights and sentenced to 10 years in jail. Wilkins and Thomas served six, plus four years' probation. Eaton, 42, died of "an apparent heart attack" before he could appeal and was buried March 12, 1966, in Bessemer, Ala., "with full Klan honors," according to a United Press International report on that date.

"I'm Going to Get Killed One Day"

ROWE LEFT Alabama for San Diego, Calif., where he lived under an assumed identity provided by the government. He worked for about two years as a U.S. marshal, a "reward" the Justice Department admits it gave him for his Klan work. He said he got into a money dispute with the Justice Department and was "forced to resign" from the marshal's job. He spent the rest of his time in California trying to run a bar.

In 1975, Rowe "surfaced" again to testify before the Senate intelligence committee about his Klan activities. Wearing a crudely cut white mask, he repeated his charge that the FBI instructed him to have sex with Klan wives — a charge bureau officials denied. His testimony before the committee led to the birth of his ghost-written book.

Some people say Rowe would not have his present problems if he had left "the whole story" alone. Rowe is one of them. Eugene Thomas, who now admits he drove the chase car in the Liuzzo killing, is another.

In a segment aired July 10 on the ABC-TV News program "20/20," Thomas and Wilkins made their first public allegation that Rowe killed Liuzzo. Thomas subsequently told The Post he had no intention of becoming reinvolved in the case after he finished his probation. "But people from ABC News started contacting us way back in 1977," he says, speaking of himself and Wilkins. "They just kept after us for a story until we said okay."

Thomas says he and Wilkins and Eaton said nothing in their defense in the earlier trials because Murphy, their first attorney, advised them not to take the witness stand or to do anything that would place them in the car with Rowe. "Our attorney just made a 'not guilty' plea," Thomas says, "and we stood on that . . . All four of us were in that car. I mean, hell, that was a known fact. But we kept silent and were tried on a lesser charge."

Still, what would be the sense of talking now? "Now, we have served our time and finished our parole," Thomas says. "It was hell being in jail for something you know you were not guilty of, and that Rowe, well, he's got away with a lot."

"If we had come out here and wanted to tell this story before, nobody would have believed us. They would have said it was revenge . . . We just would like to see Rowe pay for what he did do, because we paid for what we didn't do."

Nowadays, Rowe lives in a small southern town under an assumed name. The Justice Department no longer provides protection for him. In fact, one department official remarks, "We haven't had any contact with him for years. He's just a citizen . . . It's his business what he does. It's really up to him."

Rowe knows that. And though he and his lawyer have vowed to fight extradition to Alabama, he says he "won't run away anywhere."

"The way I figure it is that I'm going to get killed one day," he says. "I'm prepared for a hit. Anybody could get hit, you know, and maybe that's what it's going to take to get somebody to really look into this mess. But I'll tell you this — whoever they send to hit me had better be good, because if he ain't, mark my word, the bastard will never see home again."